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ABSTRACT

A study used Elizabeth Flynn's interpretive strategies to look at high school students' reading responses. Subjects, 30 high school students, 15 males and 15 females (15 freshmen and 15 seniors) were assigned 3 short stories to read and were then asked to write responses to the stories. Results indicated that: (1) males were much more likely to reject or dominate the text if the story was difficult or if the subject of the story was uncomfortable for them or unfamiliar; (2) females seldom reacted to difficult text in the way the males did; (3) females were more often able to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of text; (4) senior females were slightly more apt to use dominance of text than freshman females; and (5) seniors expressed themselves a bit more clearly and wrote more at length than freshmen. Findings suggest that differences between the sexes in reading responses exist. Ongoing research is examining why these differences exist. (Contains 28 references. Appendixes present data and the three short stories.) (RS)

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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL READING RESPONSES

BY

RUTH DERGE PABICH

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE 5
Reading as a Transactional Process 5
Gender Differences in Reading Response 7

CHAPTER THREE
RESPONSES TO "B. WORDSWORTH" 13

CHAPTER FOUR
RESPONSES TO "THE MAN TO SEND RAIN CLOUDS" 22

CHAPTER FIVE
RESPONSES TO "THANK YOU, M'AM" 33

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION 41
Results of the Study 41
Implications for Future Study 43
Implications for Teaching 44

LIST OF WORKS CITED 47

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED 49

APPENDIX 53

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL

READING RESPONSES

BY

RUTH DERGE PABICH

The University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire, 1995
Under the Supervision of Dr. Rhoda Maxwell

The approach to teaching literature in high school has been changing over the last ten years. Starting with work done by Louise Rosenblatt over fifty years ago, reading is now thought of as a transaction between the reader and the text. The reader brings to the text whatever feelings, thoughts, and memories she has at the time of the reading. How students respond to a text is important and determines if they will learn or be changed by the interaction. Therefore, studying student reading responses can be helpful when looking for ways to improve their literary experiences, and quite a few studies of responses have been done. However, little research has been done to look for patterns of response based on gender.

One important study of reading response and gender is Elizabeth Flynn's "'Gender and Reading" which was first published in 1983. This paper follows Flynn's study as a model, using her interpretive strategies to look at students' reading responses. The reading sample consisted of thirty high school students, fifteen

females and fifteen males, who also were fifteen freshmen (eight females and seven males) and fifteen seniors (seven females and eight males). As in Flynn's study, the students in this study were assigned three short stories to read and were then asked to write responses to the stories.

The results of this study support Flynn's findings. In this study as in Flynn's study, males showed in their responses that they were much more likely to reject or dominate the text if the story was difficult or if the subject of the story was uncomfortable for them or unfamiliar. In fact, the males in this study were even more apt to reject or dominate the text, especially in two of the stories where over half the males responded by dominating the text. This study also found, as had Flynn, that female readers seldom react to a difficult text in that way. Another of Flynn's central contentions supported in this study is that females are more often able to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the text. This was especially true of the story that was easiest for the students to understand.

Unlike Flynn's study which looked at only college freshmen, this study dealt with two different age levels, high school seniors and freshmen, and two differences between the classes were noted. First of all, although dominance of the text is a strategy seldom used by females, senior females were slightly more apt to use it

than freshman females. Second, although females were more likely to achieve comprehension and meaningful engagement with the text, there is little difference between the number of freshmen and the number of seniors who reached this level. The only difference noted is that seniors expressed themselves a bit more clearly and wrote more at length.

Why men and women react differently and why women are better readers is not known, but there is interesting research relating to generic biological differences going on right now. For example, research currently being done regarding how women and men use their brains differently suggests women, unlike men, use both hemispheres of the brain simultaneously, which could account for women being better able to achieve that balance between critical detachment and empathy when reading.

Rhoda L. Maxwell July 25, 1995

Thesis Adviser (Signature) Date

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The approach and methods used to teach literature in high school have changed drastically in the last ten years. Literature is no longer thought of as a body of knowledge which the reader must approach as a spectator to observe, admire, and decipher. In the past, teaching literature in a high school classroom followed a set teacher-directed routine. A short story might be assigned to be read overnight, and the next day it was discussed. The discussion usually consisted of a question and answer period during which the teacher tried to elicit the "right" answers regarding what the story was about and what it "meant." The story was a puzzle the students were to solve with the teacher holding the answers to the puzzle. Beyond that, students were also expected to be able to analyze the story, that is, to look for devices such as irony and symbolism. Students' personal and emotional reactions to a piece of literature were for the most part ignored. This approach to literature was not true in all classrooms, but it did occur in many and still happens in some high school English classes today.

However, that teacher-centered approach to teaching literature is happening less as more teachers approach literature not as a puzzle to be solved or an exercise to be worked but as something to be experienced. The role of the reader is now recognized as being as

important as the words on the page. One of the main achievements of cognitive science in the past fifteen years has been to make us aware of the extent to which even the simplest understanding and recollection depend on knowledge that the reader already has. The act of reading is now thought of as an interaction between the text and the reader.

How students respond to a text and why they respond in certain ways are important for teachers to understand as we look for ways to enhance students' experiences with literature. One area to explore as we seek to understand reader response is what role, if any, gender plays in how a student responds to a piece of literature. While there has been a good deal written about and research done regarding gender issues in the teaching of English, most of such work has centered on gender fairness or equity, feminist criticism, and teachers' treatment and expectations of students based on gender. Few studies have been done on gender-based differences in reading responses. This is a study of such differences using a sample of thirty high school students.

The high school students who comprise the sample consist of fifteen girls and fifteen boys. The students are also two different grade levels: seven senior girls and eight senior boys; eight freshmen girls and seven freshmen boys. The two levels were used to see how gender-based differences might also relate to maturity or age. The students in the sample are representative of the entire freshman and senior classes in that all levels of ability are

respresented.

The study was done in a small midwestern farming community with a population of around twelve hundred people who are largely of Polish and German heritage. The majority of the population belong to the Catholic Church. There are still many family farms in the area, and the town has a few small industries. The biggest city in the area has a population of around sixty thousand and is almost an hour's drive away. Minneapolis and St. Paul are approximately two hours away.

The high school in this community has two hundred twenty students with between fifty and sixty students in each grade. There are very few students of color in the student body; at the time of the study there were only two. I have lived in this community for thirty years, and have taught English at the high school for the last ten years. During those ten years I have taught primarily writing classes but have lately begun teaching more literature classes which led me to do this study.

The study was organized to occur on three separate occasions for each group, seniors and freshmen. At three separate times each group was given three short stories to read and students were then immediately asked to write responses. They were told they could respond in any of a number of ways, such as how the story made them feel, what ideas it triggered, how they liked it, or what they thought it was about. The stories were read by the individual students in class, and they were then given twenty minutes or a

little more to write the responses. The three stories range from fairly accessible to more complex and unfamiliar. The stories are "B. Wordworth" by V.S. Naipaul, "The Man to Send Rainclouds' by Leslie Marmon Silko, and "Thank You, M'am" by Langston Hughes.

Errors in punctuation and spelling in the students' responses included in this study have been corrected so as not to distract from the the response statements. For one story, "The Man to Send Rainclouds," the students had the benefit of study questions that followed the story. Some students referred to these questions in their responses. The students' responses to these stories were examined considering reading as a transactional process and using Elizabeth Flynn's study entitled "Gender and Reading" as a model. Background on the transactional theory of reading and a description of Flynn's study are included in Chapter 2. The three short stories are found in the appendix. Charts summarizing the results, described in chapters three through five are also in the appendix.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading as a Transactional Process

Two important voices in the shift from thinking of literature as a body of knowledge to considering the importance of what the reader brings to a literary experience are Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt. In The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response Iser wrote of this approach:

> The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us. When the subject is separated from himself, the resultant spontaneity is guided and shaped by the text in such a way that it is transformed into a new and real consciousness. Thus each text constitutes its own reader (157).

However, it was Louise Rosenblatt who is credited with first promulgating the transactional theory of literature. In this theory meaning evolves from the joining of the author's text and the reader's personality and experience. Rosenblatt describes the reading event in Literature as Exploration.

> Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that the words and

> images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates . . . The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination enter into the reader's relationship with the text (30-31).

Rosenblatt insisted on paying attention to the human element. She believed students must be free to deal with their own reactions, and it will only hurt the student's literary experience to bypass those reactions (66). If readers are to learn from their reading, they must begin with the ideas and pictures it awakens in them and work from there.

Ben Nelms in his book Literature in the Classroom: Readers, Texts, and Contexts suggests the experience or literature is a process which involves four recursive stages or activities (6-9). The first is evocation, the stage at which we give ourselves up to the story or poem. As soon as we consider, talk, or write about the piece we are in the next stage, the response. At this stage questions are raised, tentative hypothesis are formed, confusion may be expressed. This is where the experience of literature ends for most readers. Interpretation is the next stage which consists of pulling the response and details together to make sense of it. This is where we may go to professional critics, especially if the text is complex. Finally, the last stage is true criticism. Here there is an attempt "to place the work in larger contexts - to define its place in its social milieu or the history of ideas, to evaluate its significance

according to any number of established or newly proposed criteria" (8).

In the past teachers promoted the analysis and criticism of stages three and four, interpretation and criticism, but did not acknowledge or work with the pleasure of stage one, evocation, or the importance of stage two, personal response. However, as the role of the reader is better understood, teachers are helping students "lose themselves and find themselves in good books" (Nelms 9). Students must not only lose themselves but also must develop some awareness to be able to question the text rather than to blindly agree. Students must develop the willingness to become involved and perhaps be changed, rather than summarily rejecting what they read. Therefore, the first two stages, evocation and response, will determine what kind of literary experience will take place. That initial interaction of reader and text determines how and if the reader will be changed by the literary experience.

Gender Differences in Reading Responses

In 1982 Jonathan Culler reasoned that

> "If the experience of literature depends upon the qualities of a reading self, one can ask what difference it would make to the experience of literature and thus to the meaning of literature if this self were, for example, female rather than male. If the meaning of the work is the experience of the reader, what difference does it make if the reader is a woman?"(42)

Culler also notes the claim of many feminist critics that "women's

experience . . . will lead them to value works differently from their male counterparts, who may regard the problems women characteristically encounter as of limited interest"(45).

Few studies have been done in which reading response samples are taken to look for patterns of response based on gender. David Bleich's and Elizabeth Flynn's studies are often mentioned. These studies will be looked at more closely, but first, the few other studies that were found require mention. In 1970 B. Ash developed an instrument to measure literary responses of one hundred 11th-graders. He found girls scored higher than boys in eleven categories of response. The categories include guess, unsupported judgement, and narrational among others (Farrell 163). Six other studies on differences in gender response were included in a selected bibliography in Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective ; however, they will not be discussed here because they deal with specific issues such as reactions to romance novels or reactions to female characters (Farrell163-6). One other study, "Gender Differences in Responses to Literature" by Cynthia Bowman, also found gender differences. This high school teacher studied the learning logs of 120 high school students to look for gender differences in the reading responses. Among other things, she observed that girls identified with female characters while boys identified with males, and boys were quicker to form opinions while girls were more reflective and seemed to be more idealogical (80-92).

David Bleich's and Elizabeth A. Flynn's studies are most often discussed in the literature on gender differences in reading responses. Bleich found that women experience a story as a "world" without paying much attention to the fact that this world was narrated into existence. Women enter the world of the story while men are much more aware of the author's voice and look at the story as something the author created. In his research Bleich found women describe the story as an experience while men saw the story as a chain of information or facts and were more distant from the text (239).

Elizabeth Flynn's study entitled "Gender and Reading" provides the model which this study follows. Flynn's study, first published in 1983 looked for reading patterns of male and female readers. Flynn conducted an exploratory study to look at the interpretive strategies of college freshmen in their reading responses to three short stories. Her analysis was based on the idea that the reading process involves a confrontation between self, the reader, and "other," the text. The coexistence of reader and text can take several forms. If the reader resists the new thought or subject and is unchanged by the reading experience, the reader dominates the text. If the reader allows the new thought to overpower and replace the self, the text dominates the reader. Finally, if the self and text interact in such a way that the reader learns and is changed without losing critical distance, productive interaction takes place. For productive interaction to occur, the reader becomes a detached

observer who is empathetic but does not identify too closely with the character or situation in the story. There is a balance between detachment and involvement. Too much detachment can result in too much judgement and therefore domination of the text. Too much involvement can lead to too much sympathy and therefore domination by the text and submission of the reader (Flynn 268-270).

Like Bleich, Flynn found differences between male and female reading responses. Males, she found, can react to disturbing stories or ideas by rejecting or dominating them, a strategy women seldom, if ever, employ. She also found that women more often arrive at meaningful interpretations of stories that account for textual details. Women "more frequently break free of submissive entanglement in a text and evaluate characters with critical detachment" (285). But women also more frequently achieve "a balance between detachment and involvement" and interact on a more personal level with the text (285).

In 1994 Flynn wrote an essay entitled " 'Gender and Reading' Revisited." In this essay Flynn looks at her study in light of changes that have taken place since the study was done. For one thing, she responds to some feminists who are now critical of her study. She responds to critic Nina Bahym's charge that Flynn was imposing her ideological framework on the students in her analysis of their responses in "Gender and Reading." She rejects the radically relativist position of Bahyn who maintains there are no "correct" interpretations of a text (313). Flynn maintains some readings are

better than others and that misreading is possible (314). In fact, she uses Bahym's interpretation of her study as an example of a misreading.

Next, Flyunn acknowledges that while "Gender and Reading" is an empirical study, her work now has moved closer to the approach of David Bleich which is interpretive rather than experimental (315).

Finally, in " 'Gender and Reading' Revisited" Flynn explains how "Gender and Reading" is not influenced by postmodernism. Postmodern feminists warn of the danger of essentialism, the identification of essential characteristics on the basis of gender. Flynn acknowledges that the study was more a product of cultural feminism than of postmodern feminism. Current reading response theory also "challanges cognitive models of reader - text interaction, suggesting instead that reading take place within social context" (317). However, she seems to be saying that most critics of her study are probably misreading it. Also, although her study reflected her situation in feminist literary studies, composition studies, and reader-response theory in the 1980s, the study is still of value and has many supporters.

Both Flynn's and Bleich's studies were done with either adult or college-age readers. This study examines high school readers using Flynn's model of interpretive strategies. Flynn's central contentions regarding gender-based differences in reading responses were found to hold up with high school students. Also, this study compares freshmen and senior answers to see how gender-based differences

might also relate to maturity or age.

CHAPTER THREE

RESPONSES TO "B. WORDSWORTH"

V. S. Naipaul's "B. Wordsworth" is probably the most complex and unusual selection the readers were asked to work with. The students seemed to be pretty much confused or overwhelmed by the story, but how they dealt with their feelings varied somewhat according to gender.

The story takes place in Trinidad. A young boy meets an older man who claims to be the greatest poet in the world. The boy and man become friends, and the old man shows the boy the wonder of the world and tells the boy he too is a poet. However, in the end the old man dies, discouraged and sad, telling the boy it was all a lie. After the poet dies, his little house with its lush, wild gardens is replaced by brick and concrete. This then is a story about being a poet in a philistine society. It also addresses the uselessness of a poet in a colonized society. B. Wordsworth couldn't sell his poems and in the end couldn't even write poems in a place in which there is no poetry, and so he denies it all.

While most of the responses to this story were submissive, a third of the students, ten males (six seniors and four freshmen) and one female (a freshman), dominated the text. None of the students were able to come up with a productive interaction where they were able to resolve all of the tension and find a pattern of meaning.

The story takes place in Trinidad and includes West Indian references and dialect and that may have made it harder for the students to enter or give themselves up to the story during the stage of evocation. Ten of the fifteen males and one female in the sample dealt with this difficulty by detaching themselves. According to Flynn, detachment characterizes the dominant reader (268). One student's response illustrates that detachment.

> After reading this poem [sic] it made me think about this stranger in the story. I first felt he would steal the kid from the way he approached the young lad and from the description the boy's mother gave the reader. This story reminds me of people I see and talk to, but then I never see them again. I wonder where these people go because I enjoyed talking to them, and I liked the company they gave me. Overall, I kind of enjoyed the story. There was really no action in the story, but the mysterious man really caught my attention. I wanted to know what he stood for. I like some mysterious stories but not all. If a story like this one catches my or gets my attention, I give or rate it as a pretty good story in my case. Maybe someday I will meet all those people who I saw for a brief moment and really get to know them better. This story brought things to me to find out in my life.

This student is so detached emotionally from the story that he barely refers to the plot at all. He refers to the characters as the "stranger" and the "young lad" which also seems to keep them at a safe distance.

Some of the dominant responses showed detachment by expressing boredom or impatience with the story or with the way the story was written. One freshman wrote, "I think the poem[sic]

was very mediocre. I think that it didn't have enough depth nor did the end satisfy the beginning. . . The poem didn't go into enough detail." Another freshman wrote, "I thought the story was boring." A senior boy said, "I found this story very difficult to understand. I see a strange old man manipulating a young boy."

Another way dominance is shown is by being overly judgemental of the characters (Flynn 273). Because the reader is detached from the emotional content of the story, he is unable to empathize and therefore becomes judgemental. The following response domonstrates that characteristic:

> I think the meaning of the story was that B. Wordsworth was a dishonest man and no one cared about him. So when he died, they just tore down his house and cut down all of his trees. It was like they didn't care about anything he did or anything he had. It shows that if you aren't honest with the people around you, they will find out somehow, and it could be from you or anyone. And when you die, you won't be remembered for any good that you did just for all the lies you told and people you hurt.

This student's harsh appraisal of Wordsworth does not take into account any of the textual details about the poet's finer qualities such as his sense of wonder and his genuine excitement over simple actions. Other overly judgemental responses included. "The old man seemed like a free loader to me. He just wandered around and never did much of anything." Another judged the mother, "My one question is where is the mother in all of this? She obviously doesn't care for

the old man but is willing to give her son up to him."

Dominant responses are often marked by anger or resentment expressed by discounting the entire text. The following response is typical of several from senior boys.

> This story is unique. It breaks many rules of literature, like ending an otherwise good story because you got sick of writing. The story has no theme, no moral, no real reason to be read. It is the story of an insignificant life. B. Wordworth is a failure as a person because his entire life was a lie. I really don't understand the beginning and how it relates to the rest of the story. Perhaps I am missing something, not seeing some connection that to others may seem obvious. To that I say, "The connection was all a lie. It didn't exist." Isn't that the funniest thing you ever did hear?

This kind of aggressive response trivializes and dismisses the story by making a joke about it. Another senior boy finished his response by writing, "Remember . . . when I told you the meaning behind B. Wordworth's actions . . .? Well, that's all not true. I just make it up. In fact, is this response you're reading right now real, or is it a figment of your imagination?"

The gender differences in the reader-dominant responses of this story are very marked. Two thirds of the males responded to the difficult text by dominating it while only one of the fifteen females used that strategy. All of the rest of the responses were submissive.

Submissive responses are characterized by too much involvement in the text. The reader is unable to step back and get

some distance in order to observe with a critical eye (Flynn 269). While the dominant reader has too much distance and is unable to get involved, the submissive reader becomes too entangled in the story by identifying strongly with the protagonist or by being so close to the details she can make no sense of them. To submissive readers the text is such a strong over-powering presence that they cannot find a pattern of meaning. The text to them is a puzzle of hidden meanings. The following response demonstrates this confusion:

> When I first started reading the story, I wasn't sure what it was going to be about. The title never told me anything about the story. It was just a name. When I got further into the story, the title make more sense to me because I found out who B. Wordsworth was, but I didn't know what his purpose was. Even after the story was done, I never really found out why Wordsworth wanted to be with the boy so much, except for maybe just needing a friend. A couple of things in the story confused me. One was why Wordsworth made up everything he said to the boy, like writing the world's greatest poem, and the story he told about the boy poet and the girl poet. He was friends with the boy already; he didn't have to lie to him to gain his friendship. He picked the right time to tell the boy the truth because he was dying and the boy didn't care about anything else at the time. Another thing was the mention of a man named George. It seemed kind of weird that they'd all of a sudden just pulled some guy's name out of the blue into the story. The story wasn't too bad to read although it could have used a little more action and plot in it to liven it up a bit.

All this reader sees is fragments. He is unable to decipher which of the details are important and thus can make no sense of it all.

This reader could not find a consistent pattern of meaning because he is overly entangled in all of the details.

Another characteristic of submissive reading is too much involvement and identifying too strongly with the protagonist. The following response by a freshman illustrates this.

> It was a sad story. The boy really had no one to look up to and then this man comes along and the boy is happy that he knows him. He appriciates life a lot more now that he knows his friend, the poet. He loves him like his own father, and even more so. And then the man is dying, and the boy feels really bad. Then the man tells him that he is really a fraud. That broke the boy's heart. That was really mean of the man to bring up a boy's hopes and dreams and then throw them down.

This student is too involved with the character of the boy which results in so much sympathy. The boy's father is never mentioned in the story, yet the student believes the boy loves the poet more than his father. The student's sympathy for the character is a distraction for him, making it difficult for him to step back and observe with a critical eye. Another reader who was overly sympathetic wrote, "I think this is a good story because the boy didn't have many friends until the guy showed up on their doorstep." There is no mention in the text of whether or not the boy has other friends. Still another was very upset by the beating the boy got, "I didn't understand why he cut a whip for his mom to beat him. I sure wouldn't have." All of the responders who identified too strongly with the boy are males.

More students, three males and two females, were very

entangled with the poet. All five felt the old man was lonely and only lied to the boy so he would have someone to be with. As one student put it, "This story . . . shows how lonely a person can get."

There were many expressions of confusion and frustration with the ending. According to Flynn submissive responses almost always reveal an inability to deal with the ending of the story (274). One senior girl wrote, "The ending really did surprise me. Everything that the 'poet' was saying and doing seemed totally sincere. When he announced before he died that it was all a lie, it was a big letdown . . . I felt somewhat betrayed." Another senior girl showed some success in putting together some of the textual details, but she couldn't fit the ending into her interpretation.

> I liked this story all the way up until I read the last page. I feel cheated out of a good ending. The author could have finished this story with a little more of a flourish. The body of the story painted a beautiful picture in my head of red mangos, coconut, and purple plums, but the ending was too abrupt. I think the author could have kept such a beautiful picture and built on to it, except he cut it off completely. As soon as I read the last two paragraphs, the picture went gray with the concrete and brick buildings. The mood I felt at the end of this story was sad, depressing, and the colors I saw in my head helped to create that mood. I wish the author would have kept those colors alive through the end of this story.

Although confused at this point, this reader picked up on enough of the details of setting and mood that subsequent reading will probably lead to a satisfying interpretation. These readers were not

able to step back and observe from a critical distance while at the same time empathizing with the characters in order to fit the details into a satisfying pattern at the end. In this story if the readers don't empathize with the poet and at the same time have enough distance to be able to see the poet in a larger context, they will not understand the poet's despair at the end.

Critical distancing is particularly difficult for high school students with this story because the theme of the alienated artist is quite sophisticated for most of them. The readers who come closest to a productive interaction with the text were two girls, one a senior and the other a freshman. The freshman, who was also the only female to dominate the text, was distanced enough to be able to connect with an important idea in the story, but her response also shows a lack of empathy and she seems distant and unchanged by the experience.

> I think this story about B. Wordsworth was about a man's dreams and how he wanted to fulfill them, but he didn't know how. This man them went aound finding people and then trying to turn these people's dreams into being and becoming his life long dream, a poet. I also think that his serious and dedicated face and attitude helped to change the mind of that boy into something he thought he could never become.

On the other hand, the senior female is able to come up with a satisfying hypothesis about some of the textual details, but she identifies too strongly with the poet, and that is a distraction which keeps her from the central focus. Her response reads as follows:

There are a couple ways to take the ending. The first would be to believe the old man had lied all this time to the boy, but I don't think that was the case. I think the man spared the boy from watching him die, and when that short line says "but his voice broke," I think the old man was in fact protecting the boy.

I liked how they took everyday's pleasures as the greatest perks in life. This reminded me of how I try to live my own life, living for the small joys that make me and others smile. I especially liked some of the lines in the story. Here are my favorite two: 1. "I felt like nothing, and at the same time I had never felt so big and great in all my life." 2. "He did everything as though he were doing it for the first time in his life." I love both of these, and they remind me of myself in certain situations.

Although the freshman distanced herself too much, and the senior became overly entangled in her identification with the poet, both were able to make certain important associations from textual details.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESPONSES TO "THE MAN TO SEND RAIN CLOUDS"

The majority of the responses to this story were also submissive. This is not surprising considering the students were reading the story for the first time. It is often difficult when first encountering a story to step back and distance oneself enough to interpret it. For this story of the thirty students in the sample, nineteen were submissive readers; nine responses were dominant, eight males and one female; and one male and one female had a productive interaction.

"The Man to Send Rainclouds" is a story about a Christian priest and Native Americans of the Laguna tribe living side by side in contemporary New Mexico. The differences between the cultures of the priest and the Laguna people are demonstrated when an old man from the tribe, Teofilo, dies and must be buried. Teofilo's family bury him in the traditional way and do not tell the priest until the very end when they ask the priest to sprinkle holy water on the body at the gravesite. The priest is reluctant because there had been no funeral Mass nor had the Last Rites been performed. However, wearily, he decides to go to the gravesite and sprinkle the holy water. This makes Teofilo's family happy because now Teofilo will not be thirsty and will now surely send rain clouds.

This story may have been somewhat foreign to the students when the Laguna rites and customs are described. The story is written in

a spare, finely-honed style which reflects the Laguna's lack of emotionalism and challanges the reader to look closely at the details. It is about how the two cultures' rites, despite their different forms, are both an attempt to link the human world with a spiritual world. The priest, although kind, seems less likely to recognize these common elements between his traditions and Laguna traditions, perhaps because he is the one trying to change a differing culture. The title, however, refers to both Teofilo and the priest in that they both represent the human need to connect with a larger life force.

The nine dominant readers consisted of six seniors - five males and one female - and three freshmen males. The spiritual theme and the Laguna culture seemed to trigger resistance in some and also seemed to threaten others. One freshman boy distanced himself and seems overly judgemental of some of the characters in his response.

> About the only thing I think about this story is of Leon and Ken's instability in religious beliefs. Leon and Ken wanted Teofilo to have a Christian burial along with an Indian ceremony. This shows they didn't know whether to believe their Christian or their cultural beliefs about the afterlife. They are trying to be servants to two different "masters" (religious beliefs).
>
> Other than that, though, there is nothing else I feel or notice. However, I did think it was ironic that the name of the grandfather was Teofilo. A priest I knew had the last name Teofilo. He has died already too.

In thinking like the Christian priest that the Laguna people must

chose one or the other, the reader resists a new idea about spirituality and is probably unchanged by the reading experience. Another freshman male's detachment also results in too much judgement of the characters. This student, like the student just quoted, also seems upset by the idea of two cultures coming together, and he feels the need to place blame.

> This story was about an old Indian who'd died under a tree and his, I guess, son wanted him to be buried by the church. I think that the story was more about how the older Indians are being Americanized and about how the younger Indians aren't really Indians at all. They have already become Americans. The story really emphasized the kinds of clothes that the old Indian was wearing. How he was wearing blue jeans and a blue jacket. The story was blaming Americans for fifty percent of the "civilized" way that native Americans are today. They were blaming white people for making them Americans. But the author was also blaming the Indians for fifty percent of the problem. The author said that it was not only the white people's fault but also the fault of the Indians today. She blamed the younger Indians for being totally "Americanized."

This student is basing his judgement on preconceived ideas he has about Native American culture. He seems to be very uncomfortable and defensive about the idea of the Laguna people taking on any of the European rituals. In his mind, that has to be someone's fault. He picked up on the author's depiction of the priest as imposing his religion onto the Laguna people, but his anger about it is an over-reaction.

A few senior boys dismissed the story because they found it too

difficult or boring. One wrote the following:

> I didn't really like the story. We knew early in the story that the old man died, so there was no suspense in the entire story. The plot of the story really wasn't very interesting at all. There wasn't any kind of action going on. No one was doing anything, and that made the story boring. Some good things about the story were that they gave good descriptions about everything that happened. When they described what the old man was wearing, I got a picture of it in my head. I knew what the author was talking about when the priest was sprinkling the holy water onto the blanket and the water soaked in. Some of the things they did in the beginning confused me, like the paint on the old man's face. Towards the end of the story though, it was explained as to why they did this. This story didn't interest me because of the type of plot it had and the way nothing really went on in the way of action.

It sounds like this reader became confused early in the story, and that may have caused him to quickly lose interest. Students who dominate get bored quickly because the possibility for learning has been greatly reduced. Readers (often males) who complain if a story doesn't have enough action or suspense seem to decide soon after beginning a story if it's too "slow" or too difficult for them and they then detach which causes them to become even more confused and bored. Another senior male wrote, "I did not care for this story. I felt it was more a religious battle than anything else. . . . I found this story hard to read and understand, and therefore I did not care for it at all."

Some of the dominant readers seemed to be confused about the

ideas of religion and spirituality. One, a senior girl, wrote, "This story makes me think that maybe symbolism and superstitions play a bigger part in Ken, Louise, and Leon's life than religion does. When their grandfather dies, they don't worry about what kind of burial he would want as much as they worry about if he'll send rain clouds." Another wrote, "The story was a bit dry and pointless . . .[but] I found it to be very interesting that the Indians have such a strong belief in the supernatural and in spiritual life." Although initially dismissing the story, he leaves the door open for perhaps a better understanding of the ideas in it by at least acknowledging the Laguna people's spiritual beliefs. Subsequent readings and discussion could lead him to some new ideas about religious ritual.

Almost half of the submissive responders were able to see that the focus of the story is on the two different sets of cultural traditions, but they were not able to step back and see that it was also about common elements of the two cultures. The following freshman girl's response demonstrates this kind of confusion.

> I think this story means that if someone dies they should be given the respect they deserve. This heritage proved that in a bad or sorrowful situation, two different religions came together to give a dead man respect. This was also a way that these people felt that the old man should be blessed twice to bring good luck on his people. The people used this death as a sign to ask God for rain because they needed the rain. But by holding the death of Teofilo they were respecting his old religion yet not hurting the priest's feelings. So Teofilo was used as a sacrifice to bring them rain.

A freshman male was able to recognize that the "man" of the title could be Teofilo or the priest, but he was not able to get enough distance to see what they might represent.

> The title "The Man Who Sends Rainclouds" refers to both the priest and the grandfather. I think that when his grandfather died, he was asked to bring rainclouds because now he was a spirit, and they believed spirits could do anything. They really needed rainwater. It shows when the man saw a pile of loose sand.
>
> The priest was bringing rainwater because he sprinkled the grandfather's grane with water so the grandfather would have something to work with.

Other students also grappled with what the story is saying about the two different religions. One freshman female wrote, "What I don't understand is that they gave him holy water and their Native American [rites]." Another student wrote, "With this story you had to read a lot into it for it to make sense, and also know a little bit of the Native American rituals." A senior female put it this way, "There was also the mix of two religions, but I'm not sure what the author was saying about them, if anything." Several of the students recognized that the priest wanted the Laguna to change to the Christian faith and one student seemed upset by that idea and wrote, "It seems that the Indians found their relative dead. That I understand. What I didn't get is the part about the burial. The Indians buried their relative in the traditional way of their people, so why did the priest have to stick his nose into it? I feel it would've been just fine if he would've just done what the Indian

wanted him to do." This student is personalizing it all and identifies too strongly with the characters. All but one of the responders who focused correctly on the conflict of the two religions (although they were not able to step back enough to resolve all the tensions) were female.

Other submissive readers got too entangled by focusing on something unfamiliar or upsetting. The Laguna lack of overt emotion about death was confusing to some and caused them to get stuck in that idea. One wrote, "When someone dies, so many emotions are involved and I think that this story was lacking emotion, and that's why I didn't like it." Another wrote, "The story seems dry and cold until the end when the old man is buried and the characters are satisfied . . .It was funny how calm everyone was about the old man's death. It was sort of like business as usual when the old man died." One senior male liked how the Laguna people dealt with death. He wrote the following response:

> I didn't really like the story. Maybe I didn't fully understand it. I liked how Ken and Leon just accepted the death of their grandfather instead of making a big fuss. Maybe the Laguna tribe is better that way because they believe there is a better life for their grandfather somewhere else. This story made me think of death and especially the death of a relative or loved one and how hard it is to accept. It is good to mourn for them, but your own life must continue on.

This student focused on something that was important to him, but this focus did not help him find a pattern of meaning in the story.

The idea of death also seemed disturbing to other students and led them away from the story and into personal concerns. A freshman male wrote the following response:

> This story makes me think of how life is and that life goes on when you die. It makes me feel good to know that I someday will die and be taken care of after I die. What happens is that they sprinkle holy water on him to symbolize what the true meaning of death really is. It reminds me of when my relatives die and they are sent to rest with God. It makes me think of when my great uncle died. This story is about letting somebody go after they had passed away. This story makes me think of what a good life I have and to use it in a good way.

This student seems very overwhelmed by the story, perhaps because of the subject of death. The depiction of a strange culture and the subjects of death and religion seemed to add to the difficulty of this story for many students. One senior female, a strong reader in most ways, was able to pick up very well on the atmosphere of the story in her response.

> What I really liked about this story is the way in which the author used detail. She described every little thing about the clothes the people wore, the land around them, even the curtains in the priest's house. The details help establish the mood. The discription of the land as frozen and almost desolate, and the weather as cold and dry led me to feel as though the death of the man fit the way of life these people were facing at this time of year. It seemed like everything was dying, if not already dead, and the old man's time had come. I didn't like this story, simply because reading about the Indians' ways of life in the Southwest aren't that interesting to me.

Although able to make connections between the setting and the action in the story, this reader was not able to distance herself enough from the subject to see it may have been about more than describing Native American ritual. However, the fact that she was able to recognize the indirect commentary the setting makes on death probably is an indication that subsequent readings could lead her to seeing the connections between the setting, death, the need people have for ritual, and what all rituals may have in common.

Another way students have of dealing with the story when it seems too complex or overwhelming is to recite the plot. The reader often does this hoping the elements will come together as the response is being written. Two freshmen males did that, but they concluded their responses by still seeing the story as a series of events with no pattern or connections. This was more common with the freshmen in their responses to all of the stories.

Two of the thirty readers in the sample group, a senior male and a freshman female, were at a level of engagement with the text in which they were able to reconcile some of the conflicting elements in the story and were able to achieve that balance between detachment and involvement. The freshman female wrote the following response:

> This story makes me think about how people living so close together can be so different. You would think that living close would make you more the same, no matter what your background is. This story makes me feel good about the fact

> just because people are different and have different beliefs, they can kind of come together . . . What happens is the old guy dies when he is out watching the sheep. The guy is a Native American and is buried kind of in the Native American way, but his granddaughter wants the priest to sprinkle him with holy water. The priest isn't supposed to because there was no Last Rites or Funeral Mass, but he does anyway. This story is about two different cultures, becoming more, and more like one. It is about people with different beliefs helping each other out. It helps you realize that people are not all the same, no matter how close they live together.

Although certainly an initial reaction, this reader was able to empathize with the characters without getting caught up in incidental details, while at the same time she had enough distance to recognize the the idea of different beliefs coming together for a common cause.

The senior boy resolves the tensions in the story and also shows more advanced appreciation of literary devices in his response.

> "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" is a very interesting story about two different cultures trying to blend into one. A white priest is trying to convert a group of Laguna Indians to Christianity, but he is not having much luck. When Teofilo dies, his relatives don't even tell the priest until the the night of the burial ceremony. The relatives did, however, want the priest to sprinkle holy water on the grave. He can't understand why he should do it. When he is doing it though, the drops of water remind him of something, but he doesn't know what. They reminded him of rain and that is why the Indians wanted him to sprinkle the holy water, so they would get rain. Ironically, the priest completed an age-old burial ceremony for the Indians

This reader not only was able to achieve the balance between detachment and involvement, he also was aware of the irony in the story and reveals an appreciation for the ambiguity of what it could all mean.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESPONSES TO "THANK YOU M'AM"

The responses to "Thank You, M'am" did not follow the pattern of the two former stories. In each of the former two stories, two thirds of the students demonstrated characteristics of the submissive reader; one third or almost one third of the readers were dominant; and only two students seemed to have a productive interaction with the second story, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," while none were able to interact at that level with "B. Wordworth." In the responses to "Thank You M'am," a little less than a fourth of the readers were dominant, around a fourth of the students were submissive, and half of the responses demonstrated a productive interaction.

"Thank You, M'am" is a fairly accessible story which is very short, only two pages in length. It is the story of a brief encounter between a young boy and an older woman. The story begins with the young man trying to snatch the woman's purse on the street. The woman not only fends him off, but forces him back to her apartment where she gets him to clean up, feeds him, and gives him money to buy the shoes he wanted to get with the money he tried to steal from her. At the end he thanks her as he leaves, although that doesn't seem to be enough, and they never see each other again.

Of the seven readers who dominated the text, four were males and three were females. The dominant readers detached from the

text in two ways: either they focused on the act of stealing and were overly judgemental of the boy and his situation, or they were cynical about the woman's act of kindness in the "real world." One student who reacted rather harshly to the boy wrote, "The boy had so much evil in him he couldn't show his good side until the woman was able to bring that side of him to the surface." Another, a senior girl, wrote the following:

> The story was all right, but it didn't really get me interested in it. After reading it, I think that maybe the woman felt sorry for the boy. Seeing that he wasn't kept clean and did not have money or food, she helped him. I really don't think I would be the same way. I would have probably called the police. I can feel for kids like that, but they don't have to steal to get the things they want.

Another senior girl, a foreign exchange student, also brought previously established norms rather than empathy to the story and in so doing, silenced it. She wrote, "The story makes me feel sorry about the poor people's kids. I would like to help them, but most of them don't like to study or work, so they don't need that kind of help."

A freshman boy was very detached and saw only a lesson to be learned when he wrote his response.

> I think this story is about thinking twice. You should think twice about what you are going to do before you do it. You never know what may happen after you do it. Before you are going to steal a purse, you should think about it. Try asking

> yourself, "[Am] I going to get away with it, or will I get caught? Will I like being a criminal?" As soon as you grab that purse, your life will be changed maybe for the best, but probably for the worst.

This response, again, showed little empathy and focused on the attempted theft rather than on the woman's act of kindness.

Two senior males rejected the idea of the story and in so doing silenced it. One wrote this response:

> I did not care for this story very much. I feel that something like this would never happen, especially in today's society. I think the boy would have probably run away at the first chance he got and would have struggled more when he was caught. I don't see a woman taking a criminal in her own home even if she used to be the same way. She did get her point across to him though, but I doubt that he will pay attention to it.

The other senior male was even more aggressive in his rejection of the idea when he wrote his response.

> If an overall theme had to be stated from "Thank You, M'am," it would be this: Forgive those who harm you and help them in times of need. I get this theme from viewing the great display of generosity displayed by Mrs. Jones in the story. Her actions in the story were very unique. It is unlikely that many people would react the same way in such a situation. I think if we were all as forgiving as Mrs. Jones, the world would most certainly have a different outlook. While foregiveness is important, it may not be practical in everyday life. For example (on a larger scale), if a man was to rape, beat, and murder a woman, he would be punished harshly. But with Mrs. Jones's attitude, what would we do to him? Give him a slap on the wrist, a "We understand," and a new house to go with

them? I highly doubt it.

These two senior males resisted a new thought, clinging to previously established ideas about people and crime and in so doing are unchanged by the reading experience.

Of the eight submissive responses, only two are from female readers, one senior and one freshman, while the rest are from one senior and five freshmen males. One of the things the woman in the story says to the boy is "You didn't have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes. You could of asked me." Several of the freshmen boys became overly focused on that, to the extent that they seemed to be unaware of what happened in the story after that point. One of those freshmen wrote the following:

> I think this story is about asking for what you want even if you don't know the person you are going to ask. If you ask for what you want, you have a better chance of receiving it than if you steal it. It also makes me think about the people who don't have the money to buy the things they need and want because of loss of work or just plain being lazy. After thinking of that I feel somewhat sorry for the boy in the story bacause he has to steal from other people to get what he needs or wants to get. I also feel angry because he tries to steal or resorts to stealing instead of going out and at least trying to earn money. I think he should've asked for the money in the first place.

This student is so involved with the boy that he isn't able to get some distance or perspective. Another freshman boy is confused in a similar way.

> I think this story is about being yourself when you want something, and when you want something, just ask. I think this story means that you should do the right thing or you will be punished later. It makes me feel good to know that the lady is so kind and willing to give him ten dollars to buy some shoes. It makes me think of what I could of got if I would of just asked for it instead of taking it.

One female freshman thought the boy was "brave" when he decided not to run away, and several other freshmen females hoped he had "learned his lesson." Typically, the submissive responses were more concerned with the boy rather than with the woman's act of kindness. One senior female whose responses have usually shown some insight seemed very confused by this story. Her response indicates she suspects she's missing something.

> I think it would have been more helpful if we knew when this took place. It was hard to understand the rationale of this boy trying to steal without knowing a little of the background. Like is this in a big city, and is it in the 60's or modern day?
>
> The woman in the story was very surprising. She learned from her actions as a child. It was kind of strange when the boy found that the woman trusted him . . .The point that I took from this story is that our hardships teach us to try to help other people . . . This is why meeting and talking with as many people as we can is important.

This response is potentially interactive, but at this point the reader is too close to the details.

Of the fourteen students who demonstrated a productive interaction with the story, nine were females and five were males. A few students seemed to come to an understanding of the story in

the course of writing out their responses. The following response from a senior girl is an example of this kind of interaction:

> This story makes me wonder if the boy will try to steal again. After all, he didn't get punished or have anything bad happen to him. Maybe he'll think from now on that if I don't get caught, I get the money, and if I do get caught, some nice, old lady will give me cake and the money too. On the other hand . . . maybe this is what he and other juveniles need to set them straight

This student created a meaningful dialogue with the text during which she was open to new ideas.

Almost all of the students who seemed to have a meaningful engagement with the text talked about feeling good or hopeful about people and life. One freshman girl wrote, "This story makes me feel good to know that maybe there is someone out there who cares about people they don't know." Another freshman girl wrote, "It makes me think that in most cases bad can become good." A freshman also wrote the following:

> I think that the kid likes the lady making a fuss over him and telling him what to do. I think that she thought that she could change this kid's life, maybe set him on the right track. I think this story is about believing in people because some people can be changed. And if people would take their time they could change a kid's life. It makes me feel like you can help anybody in need.

This student, as well as all students who had a meaningful transaction with the text, sounds changed or renewed from the

experience of the story. A freshman girl wrote, "I think this story is about the kindness of people. It shows that there are people willing to help others, even if they have done something wrong. It makes me feel good knowing she would help him." A senior also expresses this new awareness:

> I think the story was g good example of how one event can profoundly affect a person's life. The boy changed rapidly as the large woman showed her compassion to a boy who had tried to snatch her purse. The story leads one to think about times in their lives when they could have taken some negative ordeal and turned it into something positive for all involved. I believe the boy will never forget the woman or her act of kindness.

Quite a few readers mentioned the idea of one person making a difference in another's life. Another senior, a male, takes this idea even further by applying it to society as a whole.

> The short story "Thank You, M'am" shows us what is wrong with society today. In the story when Roger tries to snatch Luella's purse, she responds with kindness and courtesy. . . Maybe what needs to be done is show a little compassion towards the "villain." . . . If only someone would reach out and personally help the people like Roger, we would not have so many repeat offenders. Show a little more love towards your fellow man; society depends on it.

There seemed to be a feeling of relief in the responses of many of the students that someone would return an offense with kindness. One mentioned that this story seems to illustrate the Golden Rule.

Most students in the reading sample have little contact or personal knowledge of problems in the inner cities, but several saw this story as an important part of the solution to those problems. A freshman girl expressed it in her own way.

> This story makes me feel like there is still hope in this world for the low-class. It makes me feel good about an older woman helping a young boy and not punishing him for doing wrong but showing him that not everything comes from stealing women's pocketbooks. It makes me think about all we could do if one Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones could help just one Roger, and what a better world this would be.

Although some students were able to maintain more critical distance than others, all of the students who had a productive interaction were able to achieve that balance between empathy and judgement, detachment and involvement that is needed for the reader to be changed by what is read.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Results of the Study

The conclusions drawn from this study seem to support Flynn's findings. Although the students in this study were high school freshmen and seniors and Flynn's subjects were college freshmen, the gender differences in the responses were similar. Flynn's study suggests that "male students sometimes react to disturbing stories by rejecting them or by dominating them, a strategy women do not often employ" (285). Flynn found that women were more often able to arrive at meaningful interpretations (285). This study also found males much more likely to dominate the text and women more likely than males to come to a productive interaction with the text. In this present study Flynn's findings were especially evident in the stories "B. Wordsworth" and "The Man to Send Rainclouds."

Of the thirty students in the sample, eleven dominated the text of "B. Wordsworth," ten males and one female. Ten students dominated the text of "The Man to Send Rainclouds," eight males and one female. The above two stories seemed difficult for the readers, and the male readers reacted differently to the confusion or frustration of not understanding the story in the first reading. The males had a much stronger tendency to reject or dominate the text than the female readers, who were almost all submissive to the text. In each of the above stories, however, the female readers were slightly more

likely to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the text. In the responses to "B. Wordsworth," two female readers showed more comprehension of the story than the other readers. One male and one female seemed to fully comprehend "The Man to Send Rainclouds."

The responses to "Thank You, M'am" did not follow the same pattern as the responses to the two stories just mentioned, but also suggested support for Flynn's central contentions. Perhaps because the story is less difficult, reactions were less extreme. Seven students dominated the text, four males and three females; only eight responses were submissive, six males and two females; and fourteen students, nine females and five males, arrived at a satisfying interpretation. Charts showing the totals for each of the interpretive strategies for each of the stories can be found in the index.

Interestingly, there were few differences between the freshmen and senior responses. Two differences between the classes were noted, however. First, although dominance of the text is a strategy seldom used by females, senior females were slightly more apt to use it than freshman females. Secondly, although females were more likely to achieve comprehension and meaningful engagement with the text, there is little difference between the number of freshmen and the number of seniors who reached this level. The only difference noted is that seniors expressed themselves a bit more clearly and wrote more at length.

Implications for Future Study

Flynn's findings regarding the differences between the sexes in reading responses seem to hold up in this study. The next question would seem to be why do these differences exist? Many factors, of course, contribute to gender differences. Society teaches males and females their gender-stereotypical roles in many ways. The more interesting question to many, however, is how important are biological factors in these differences? In his essay "Gender Interests in Reading and Language," David Bleich poses the question: "How far do generic biological differences reach into the mental functioning of each gender? (234). Although postmodern feminists are wary of descriptions of female biological essences, current developments in scientific research are beginning to show such differences do exist.

Much is still speculation, but more is being discovered in this area all of the time. Most researchers acknowledge that men and women think and react differently, and science has just begun ot discover the source of those differences. "Differences in male and female hormonal systems and the lateralization and specialization of their right-brains and left-brains contribute to a number of the reported gender differences" (Grossman 59). Some researchers propose that higher levels of male hormones such as testosterone affect males' activity level, aggressive behavior, and emotional reactions. However, until more research is done, theories that hormones determine differences are highly speculative

(Grossman 61).

On the other hand, research into how male and female brains work differently is very exciting right now and is beginning to provide some answers. The source of the breakthrough in this area is the use of new imaging machines which make it possible for researchers to catch brains in the very act of cogitating, feeling, or remembering. As a result, researchers are beginning to see differences in how men's and women's brains function. One recent discovery can be related to the results of this reading response survey. Researchers at Yale recently discovered with imaging machines that while men use just the rational left brain when using language, women use both hemispheres (Begley 50). Perhaps women are better readers because they draw on feeling (right brain) as well as reason (left brain) at the same time. Flynn's theory states that for reading to be a productive interaction detached critical thinking must occur simultaneously with empathetic involvement. Women may be better readers because their brains do not separate emotion from reason as does the male brain. Perhaps because the emotional right brain enriches the left brain, women are better able to achieve that balance between detachment and involvement required to have a productive literary experience.

Implications for Teaching

Reading Louise Rosenblatt and those who came after has helped me to better understand the concept of reading as a transactional

process. Although I have always believed in the importance of students' personal responses to their reading, this background information helps me to better understand why reading responses are an important stage in the student's literary experience. I found especially helpful Ben Nelms suggestion that the experience of literature is a process with four recursive stages. In order to appreciate the importance of the student's initial response to the text, it's helpful to see it in relation to the other stages of the process (6-9).

How will this change my teaching? For one thing, I will allow students more time and more room to express and work with those initial personal reactions to the text. Students who distance themselves from the text, whether it be with anger or indifference, will be given more room to work through those initial reactions. More effort will also be made to avoid students' detaching from difficult or strange texts by preparing them more carefully beforehand for what they will encounter in the text. Preparing students for what they will be reading could also alleviate students' becoming confused by getting too entangled with the details or becoming too empathetic with the characters.

By recognizing students' reactions to alien and difficult texts as dominating or being submissive to the text, I will be better equipped to model or guide them to attain that balance between critical detachment and empathy which leads to a productive learning experience. For example, students who are harshly judgemental of

the protagonist might become more empathetic by being encouraged to find similar situations or feelings in their own experience. Or, students who get overly entangled or are overly empathetic with a character can be encouraged to pull back and look at the big picture. Allowing students time for and guiding them through the stages of the process in their reading should facilitate more productive work in which they will be able to question what they read as well as being open to experience the new worlds and new ideas found in literature.

It is harder to have to state how finding patterns in responses based on gender difference will directly influence my work in the classroom. I think those observations are interesting and as we learn more about how men and women think differently as well as how their brains function, this kind of study might be a factor in helping to solve the puzzle. For now, knowing, for example, that males are more likely to detach themselves emotionally from a strange or complex text while females are more apt to become entangled in the details or are more apt to have a productive interaction than males will help indirectly when guiding them through the process.

Although it is hard to forsee exactly how I will use all I have become aware of as a result of doing this study, I am sure that all of the background literature as well as the analysis of all of the different ways students use to try to come to terms with the text will make me a more effective teacher of literature.

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APPENDIX

DOMINANT RESPONSES

	*STORY #1	STORY #2	STORY #3
**All Dominant Responses	11	9	7
Males	10	8	4
Females	1	1	3
Seniors	7	6	3
Senior Males	6	5	2
Senior Females	1	1	1
Freshmen	4	3	4
Freshmen Males	4	3	2
Freshmen Females	0	0	2

Key for the above chart and the two following charts:

* Story #1 = "B. Wordworth"
Story #2 = "The Man to Send Rainclouds"
Story #3 = "Thank You, M'am"

** Number of subjects =30
Males =15
Females =15 (except in Story #3 there were 14)
Seniors =15
Senior males = 8
Senior females = 7 (except in Story #3 there were 6)
Freshmen =15
Freshmen males = 7
Freshmen females = 8

SUBMISSIVE RESPONSES

	STORY #1	STORY #2	STORY #3
All Submissive Responses	19	19	8
Males	5	6	6
Females	14	13	2
Seniors	8	8	2
Senior Males	2	2	1
Senior Females	6	6	1
Freshmen	11	11	6
Freshmen Males	3	4	5
Freshmen Females	8	7	1

BALANCED RESPONSES

	STORY #1	STORY #2	STORY #3
All Balanced Responses	0	2	4
Males	0	1	5
Females	0	1	9
Seniors	0	1	7
Senior Males	0	1	3
Senior Females	0	0	4
Freshmen	0	1	7
Freshmen Males	0	0	2
Freshmen Females	0	1	5

V. S. Naipaul

B. Wordsworth

Three beggars called punctually every day at the hospitable houses in Miguel Street. At about ten an Indian came in his dhoti and white jacket, and we poured a tin of rice into the sack he carried on his back. At twelve an old woman smoking a clay pipe came and she got a cent. At two a blind man led by a boy called for his penny.

Sometimes we had a rogue. One day a man called and said he was hungry. We gave him a meal. He asked for a cigarette and wouldn't go until we had lit it for him. That man never came again.

The strangest caller came one afternoon at about four o'clock. I had come back from school and was in my home clothes. The man said to me, "Sonny, may I come inside your yard?"

He was a small man and he was tidily dressed. He wore a hat, a white shirt, and black trousers.

I asked, "What you want?"

He said, "I want to watch your bees."

We had four small gru-gru palm trees and they were full of uninvited bees.

I ran up the steps and shouted, "Ma, it have a man outside here. He say he want to watch the bees."

My mother came out, looked at the man and asked in an unfriendly way, "What you want?"

The man said, "I want to watch your bees."

His English was so good, it didn't sound natural, and I could see my mother was worried.

She said to me, "Stay here and watch him while he watch the bees."

The man said, "Thank you, madam. You have done a good deed today."

He spoke very slowly and very correctly as though every word was costing him money.

We watched the bees, this man and I, for about an hour, squatting near the palm trees.

The man said, "I like watching bees. Sonny, do you like watching bees?"

I said, "I ain't have the time."

He shook his head sadly. He said, "That's what I do, I just watch. I can watch ants for days. Have you ever watched ants? And scorpions, and centipedes, and *congorees*—have you watched those?"

I shook my head.

I said, "What you does do, mister?"

He got up and said, "I am a poet."

I said, "A good poet?"

He said, "The greatest in the world."

"What your name, mister?"

"B. Wordsworth."

"B for Bill?"

"Black. Black Wordsworth. White Wordsworth was my brother. We share one heart. I can watch a small flower like the morning glory and cry."

I said, "Why you does cry?"

"Why, boy? Why? You will know when you grow up. You're a poet, too, you know. And when you're a poet you can cry for everything."

I couldn't laugh.

He said, "You like your mother?"

"When she not beating me."

He pulled out a printed sheet from his hip pocket and said, "On this paper is the greatest poem about mothers and I'm going to sell it to you at a bargain price. For four cents."

I went inside and I said, "Ma, you want to buy a poetry for four cents?"

My mother said, "Tell that blasted man to haul his tail away from my yard, you hear."

I said to B. Wordsworth, "My mother say she ain't have four cents."

B. Wordsworth said, "It is the poet's tragedy."

And he put the paper back in his pocket. He didn't seem to mind.

I said, "Is a funny way to go round selling poetry like that. Only calypsonians do that sort of thing. A lot of people does buy?"

He said, "No one has yet bought a single copy."

"But why you does keep on going round, then?"

He said, "In this way I watch many things, and I always hope to meet poets."

I said, "You really think I is a poet?"

"You're as good as me," he said.

And when B. Wordsworth left, I prayed I would see him again.

About a week later, coming back from school one afternoon, I met him at the corner of Miguel Street.

He said, "I have been waiting for you a long time."

I said, "You sell any poetry yet?"

He shook his head.

He said, "In my yard I have the best mango tree in Port of Spain. And now the mangoes are ripe and red and very sweet and juicy. I have waited here for you to tell you this and to invite you to come and eat some of my mangoes."

He lived in Alberto Street in a one roomed hut placed right in the center of the lot. The yard seemed all green. There was the big mango tree. There was a coconut tree and there was a plum tree. The place looked wild, as though it wasn't in the city at all. You couldn't see all the big concrete houses in the street.

He was right. The mangoes were sweet and juicy. I ate about six, and the yellow mango juice ran down my arms to my elbows and down my mouth to my chin and my shirt was stained.

My mother said when I got home, "Where you was? You think you is a man now and could go all over the place? Go cut a whip for me."

She beat me rather badly, and I ran out of the house swearing that I would never come back. I went to B. Wordsworth's house. I was so angry, my nose was bleeding.

B. Wordsworth said, "Stop crying, and we will go for a walk."

I stopped crying, but I was breathing short. We went for a walk. We walked down St. Clair Avenue to the Savannah and we walked to the racecourse.

B. Wordsworth said, "Now, let us lie on the grass and look up at the sky, and I want you to think how far those stars are from us."

I did as he told me, and I saw what he meant. I felt like nothing, and at the same time I had never felt so big and great in all my life. I forgot all my anger and all my tears and all the blows.

When I said I was better, he began telling me the names of the stars, and I particularly remembered the constellation of Orion the Hunter, though I don't really know why. I can spot Orion even today, but I have forgotten the rest.

Then a light was flashed into our faces, and we saw a policeman. We got up from the grass.

The policeman said, "What you doing here?"

B. Wordsworth said, "I have been asking myself the same question for forty years."

We became friends, B. Wordsworth and I. He told me, "You must never tell anybody about me and about the mango tree and the coconut tree and the plum tree. You must keep that a secret. If you tell anybody, I will know, because I am a poet."

I gave him my word and I kept it.

I liked his little room. It had no more furniture than George's front room, but it looked cleaner and healthier. But it also looked lonely.

One day I asked him, "Mr. Wordsworth, why you does keep all this bush in your yard? Ain't it does make the place damp?"

He said, "Listen, and I will tell you a story. Once upon a time a boy and girl met each other and they fell in love. They loved each other so much they got married. They were both poets. He loved words. She loved grass and flowers and trees. They lived happily in a single room, and then one day, the girl poet said to the boy poet, "We are going to have another poet in the family." But this poet was never born, because the girl died, and the young poet died with her, inside her. And the girl's husband was very sad, and he said he would never touch a thing in the girl's garden. And so the garden remained, and grew high and wild."

I looked at B. Wordsworth, and as he told me this lovely story, he seemed to grow older. I understood his story.

We went for long walks together. We went to the Botanical Gardens and the Rock Gardens. We climbed Chancellor Hill in the late afternoon and watched the darkness fall on Port of Spain, and watched the lights go on in the city and on the ships in the harbor.

He did everything as though he were doing it for the first time in his life. He did everything as though he were doing some church rite.

He would say to me, "Now, how about having some ice cream?"

And when I said yes, he would grow very serious and say, "Now, which café shall we patronize?" As though it were a very important thing. He would think for some time about it, and finally say, "I think I will go and negotiate the purchase with that shop."

The world became a most exciting place.

One day, when I was in his yard, he said to me, "I have a great secret which I am now going to tell you."

I said, "It really secret?"

"At the moment, yes."

I looked at him, and he looked at me. He said, "This is just between you and me, remember. I am writing a poem."

"Oh." I was disappointed.

He said, "But this is a different sort of poem. This is the greatest poem in the world."

I whistled.

He said, "I have been working on it for more than five years now. I will finish it in about twenty-two years from now, that is, if I keep on writing at the present rate."

"You does write a lot, then?"

He said, "Not any more. I just write one line a month. But I make sure it is a good line."

I asked, "What was last month's good line?"

He looked up at the sky, and said, "*The past is deep.*"

I said, "It is a beautiful line."

B. Wordsworth said, "I hope to distill the experiences of a whole month into that single line of poetry. So, in twenty two years, I shall have written a poem that will sing to all humanity."

I was filled with wonder.

Our walks continued. We walked along the seawall at Docksite one day, and I said, "Mr. Wordsworth, if I drop this pin in the water, you think it will float?"

He said, "This is a strange world. Drop your pin, and let us see what will happen."

The pin sank.

I said, "How is the poem this month?"

But he never told me any other line. He merely said, "Oh, it comes, you know. It comes."

Or we would sit on the seawall and watch the liners come into the harbor.

But of the greatest poem in the world I heard no more.

I felt he was growing older.

"How you does live, Mr. Wordsworth?" I asked him one day.

He said, "You mean how I get money?"

When I nodded, he laughed in a crooked way.

He said, "I sing calypso in the calypso season."

"And that last you the rest of the year?"

"It is enough."

"But you will be the richest man in the world when you write the greatest poem?"

He didn't reply.

One day when I went to see him in his little house, I found him lying on his little bed. He looked so old and so weak, that I found myself wanting to cry.

He said, "The poem is not going well."

He wasn't looking at me. He was looking through the window at the coconut tree, and he was speaking as though I wasn't there. He said, "When I was twenty I felt the power within myself." Then, almost in front of my eyes, I could see his face growing older and more tired. He said, "But that – that was a long time ago."

And then – I felt it so keenly, it was as though I had been slapped by my mother. I could see it clearly on his face. It was there for everyone to see. Death on the shrinking face.

He looked at me, and saw my tears and sat up.

He said, "Come." I went and sat on his knees.

He looked into my eyes, and he said, "Oh, you can see it, too. I always knew you had the poet's eye."

He didn't even look sad, and that made me burst out crying loudly.

He pulled me to his thin chest, and said, "Do you want me to tell you a funny story?" and he smiled encouragingly at me.

But I couldn't reply.

He said, "When I have finished this story, I want you to promise that you will go away and never come back to see me. Do you promise?"

I nodded.

He said, "Good. Well, listen. That story I told you about the boy poet and the girl poet, do you remember that? That wasn't true. It was something I just made up. All this talk about poetry and the greatest poem in the world, that wasn't true, either. Isn't that the funniest thing you have heard?"

But his voice broke.

I left the house, and ran home crying, like a poet, for everything I saw.

I walked along Alberto Street a year later, but I could find no sign of the poet's house. It hadn't vanished, just like that. It had been pulled down, and a big two storied building had taken its place. The mango tree and the plum tree and the coconut tree had all been cut down, and there was brick and concrete everywhere.

It was just as though B. Wordsworth had never existed.

THE MAN TO SEND RAIN CLOUDS

Leslie Marmon Silko

This story, by a contemporary Native American writer, has one setting in which two different cultures exist side by side. One culture is that of the Laguna, a Pueblo tribe in New Mexico. The Laguna survive alongside the culture of the European settlers who have come to their country and introduced their own way of life. Before you begin reading, write down briefly what you think the title means. Which culture do you think this man will belong to?

Eagle Dancer by Mavaaru Dixon (c. 1933) Oil.

The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California
Bequest of the Artist

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They found him under a big cottonwood tree. His Levi jacket and pants were faded light blue so that he had been easy to find. The big cottonwood tree stood apart from a small grove of winter-bare cottonwoods which grew in the wide, sandy arroyo. He had been dead for a day or more, and the sheep had wandered and scattered up and down the arroyo. Leon and his brother in-law, Ken, gathered the sheep and left them in the pen at the sheep camp before they returned to the cottonwood tree. Leon waited under the tree while Ken drove the truck through the deep sand to the edge of the arroyo. He squinted up at the sun and unzipped his jacket—it sure was hot for this time of year. But high and northwest the blue mountains were still in snow. Ken came sliding down the low, crumbling bank about fifty yards down, and he was bringing the red blanket.

Before they wrapped the old man, Leon took a piece of string out of his pocket and tied a small gray feather in the old man's long white hair. Ken gave him the paint. Across the brown, wrinkled forehead he drew a streak of white and along the high cheekbones he drew a strip of blue paint. He paused and watched Ken throw pinches of cornmeal and pollen into the wind that fluttered the small gray feather. Then Leon painted with yellow under the old man's broad nose, and finally, when he had painted green across the chin, he smiled.

"Send us rain clouds, Grandfather." They laid the bundle in the back of the pickup and covered it with a heavy tarp before they started back to the pueblo.

They turned off the highway onto the sandy pueblo road. Not long after they passed the store and post office, they saw Father Paul's car coming toward them. When he recognized their faces, he slowed his car and waved for them to stop. The young priest rolled down the car window.

"Did you find old Teoñilo?" he asked loudly.

Leon stopped the truck. "Good morning, Father. We were just out to the sheep camp. Everything is O.K. now."

"Thank God for that. Teoñilo is a very old man. You really shouldn't allow him to stay at the sheep camp alone."

"No, he won't do that anymore now."

"Well, I'm glad you understand. I hope I'll be seeing you at Mass this week—we missed you last Sunday. See if you can get old Teoñilo to come with you." The priest smiled and waved at them as they drove away.

Louise and Teresa were waiting. The table was set for lunch, and the coffee was boiling on the black iron stove. Leon looked at Louise and then at Teresa.

"We found him under a cottonwood tree in the big arroyo near sheep camp. I guess he sat down to rest in the shade and never got up again." Leon walked toward the old man's bed. The red plaid shawl had been shaken and spread carefully over the bed, and a new brown flannel shirt and pair of stiff new Levi's were arranged neatly beside the pillow. Louise held the screen door open while Leon and Ken carried in the red blanket. He looked small and shriveled, and after they dressed him in the new shirt and pants, he seemed more shrunken.

It was noontime now, because the church bells rang the Angelus. They ate the beans with hot bread, and nobody said anything until after Teresa poured the coffee.

Ken stood up and put on his jacket. "I'll see about the gravediggers. Only the top layer of soil is frozen. I think it can be ready before dark."

Leon nodded his head and finished his coffee. After Ken had been gone for a while, the neighbors and clanspeople came quietly to embrace Teoñilo's family and to leave food on the table because the gravediggers would come to eat when they were finished.

The sky in the west was full of pale yellow light. Louise stood outside with her hands in the pockets of Leon's green army jacket that was too big for her. The funeral was over, and the old men had taken their candles and medicine bags and were gone. She waited until the body was laid into the pickup before she said anything to Leon. She touched his arm, and he noticed that her hands were still dusty from the cornmeal that she had sprinkled around the old man. When she spoke, Leon could not hear her.

"What did you say? I didn't hear you."

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"I said that I had been thinking about something."

"About what?"

"About the priest sprinkling holy water for Grandpa. So he won't be thirsty."

Leon stared at the new moccasins that Teofilo had made for the ceremonial dances in the summer. They were nearly hidden by the red blanket. It was getting colder, and the wind pushed gray dust down the narrow pueblo road. The sun was approaching the long mesa, where it disappeared during the winter. Louise stood there shivering and watching his face. Then he zipped up his jacket and opened the truck door. "I'll see if he's there."

Ken stopped the pickup at the church, and Leon got out; and then Ken drove down the hill to the graveyard where people were waiting. Leon knocked at the old carved door with its symbols of the Lamb. While he waited, he looked up at the twin bells from the king of Spain with the last sunlight pouring around them in their tower.

The priest opened the door and smiled when he saw who it was. "Come in! What brings you here this evening?"

The priest walked toward the kitchen, and Leon stood with his cap in his hand, playing with the earflaps and examining the living room—the brown sofa, the green armchair, and the brass lamp that hung down from the ceiling by links of chain. The priest dragged a chair out of the kitchen and offered it to Leon.

"No thank you, Father. I only came to ask you if you would bring your holy water to the graveyard."

The priest turned away from Leon and looked out the window at the patio full of shadows and the dining-room windows of the nuns' cloister across the patio. The curtains were heavy, and the light from within faintly penetrated; it was impossible to see the nuns inside eating supper. "Why didn't you tell me he was dead? I could have brought the Last Rites anyway."

Leon smiled. "It wasn't necessary, Father."

The priest stared down at his scuffed brown loafers and the worn hem of his cassock. "For a Christian burial it was necessary."

His voice was distant, and Leon thought that his blue eyes looked tired.

"It's O.K. Father, we just want him to have plenty of water."

The priest sank down into the green chair and picked up a glossy missionary magazine. He turned the colored pages full of lepers and pagans without looking at them.

"You know I can't do that, Leon. There should have been the Last Rites and a funeral Mass at the very least."

Leon put on his green cap and pulled the flaps down over his ears. "It's getting late, Father. I've got to go."

When Leon opened the door, Father Paul stood up and said, "Wait." He left the room and came back wearing a long brown overcoat. He followed Leon out the door and across the dim churchyard to the adobe steps in front of the church. They both stooped to fit through the low adobe entrance. And when they started down the hill to the graveyard, only half of the sun was visible above the mesa.

The priest approached the grave slowly, wondering how they had managed to dig into the frozen ground; and then he remembered that this was New Mexico and saw the pile of cold loose sand beside the hole. The people stood close to each other with little clouds of steam puffing from their faces. The priest looked at them and saw a pile of jackets, gloves, and scarves in the yellow, dry tumbleweeds that grew in the graveyard. He looked at the red blanket, not sure that Teofilo was so small, wondering if it wasn't some perverse Indian trick—something they did in March to ensure a good harvest—wondering if maybe old Teofilo was actually at sheep camp corraling the sheep for the night. But there he was, facing into a cold, dry wind and squinting at the last sunlight, ready to bury a red wool blanket while the faces of his parishioners were in shadow with the last warmth of the sun on their backs.

His fingers were stiff, and it took him a long time to twist the lid off the holy water. Drops of water fell on the red blanket and soaked into dark icy spots. He sprinkled the grave and the water disappeared almost before it touched the dim, cold sand; it reminded him of something—he tried to

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remember what it was, because he thought if he could remember he might understand this. He sprinkled more water: he shook the container until it was empty, and the water fell through the light from sundown like August rain that fell while the sun was still shining, almost evaporating before it reached the wilted squash flowers.

The wind pulled at the priest's brown Franciscan robe and swirled away the cornmeal and pollen that had been sprinkled on the blanket. They lowered the bundle into the ground, and they didn't bother to untie the stiff pieces of new rope that were tied around the ends of the blanket. The sun was gone, and over on the highway the eastbound lane was full of headlights. The priest walked away slowly. Leon watched him climb the hill, and when he had disappeared within the tall, thick walls, Leon turned to look up at the high blue mountains in the deep snow that reflected a faint red light from the west. He felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water: now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.

Mogui child's blanket (Navajo).
Anonymous. Wool.

Collection of the Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A.

Responding to the Story

Analyzing the Story

Identifying Facts

1. The **setting** in this story includes two distinct cultures. What are some of the symbols and rites of the Laguna culture?
2. What symbols and rites of Father Paul's culture are mentioned in the story?
3. In Christian tradition, holy water is often used symbolically as a sign of purification. Name the two reasons Louise and Leon want the priest to sprinkle holy water on Teofilo's grave. Why does the priest say he can't?

Interpreting Meanings

4. Why do you think Leon and Ken withhold the news of Teofilo's death from Father Paul when they meet him on the way home?
5. Explain why the priest's eyes look "tired" when he says that he should have administered the Last Rites to Teofilo.
6. Why do you think the old man's family wants both kinds of burial ceremony?
7. Why do you suppose Father Paul agrees to sprinkle the holy water on Teofilo's grave? When he sprinkles the water "... it reminded him of something—he tried to remember what it was, because he thought if he could remember he might understand this" (pages 158–159). What do you think the falling water reminds the priest of? What exactly is he trying to understand?
8. What do you think the story's title means? Who is the man to send raincloucs—old Teofilo or Father Paul? Is there more than one possible answer? Explain.

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THANK YOU, M'AM

Langston Hughes

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"I'm very sorry lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering *you* when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with *me*," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—*and went to the sink.*

"Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

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"Not with that face. I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook."

"I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"M'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and, not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After awhile she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks*. Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if He didn't already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, redheads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, "Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else's*—because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Goodnight! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street.

The boy wanted to say something else other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but he couldn't do so as he turned at the barren stoop and looked back at the large woman in the door. He barely managed to say "Thank you," before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

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